Re-engineering Democracy

What is the issue?

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Online polls are gaining ground in the digital age.

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Democracy:

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- It is common knowledge that there are two types of democracy: **direct and indirect.**
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- A direct democracy does not award full governance powers to the government.
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- Instead, using the mechanisms **of referendum, recall, initiative and plebiscite,** direct democracy allows the participation of every enfranchised citizen in approving many major governmental decisions.
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- An indirect democracy, on the other hand, vests elected representatives, who run the government under a leader, with vast powers to take decisions on behalf of its people.
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How indirect democracy is justified?

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- One, **leadership is not the speciality of everybody.**
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- Taking sound political decisions requires the collaboration of many kinds of deep expertise in subjects as varied as economics, finance and psychology, overseen by the definition-eluding leadership.
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- Two, it is **unwieldy and cumbersome,** if not impossible, to secure the vote

of millions of people on every significant decision.
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What is the core purpose of democracy?

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- The core purpose of a democracy is **to execute the will of its people.**
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- The internet and IT provide sophisticated tools to enable the core purpose.
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- Central to the re-engineering of the current democracy would be the online poll.
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What is the usage of online polls?

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- Online polls may be **used to collect authentic data from millions of people** within a short time with barely any cost to the citizen and only an incremental increase in the IT budgets of the government.
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- Such polls would **help overcome the great limitation** of the indirect democracy model in collecting reliable poll results in a short period of time from hundreds of millions of people.
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- The polls could be conducted with security being provided for by a citizen id (the voter id or Aadhaar in India, the social security number in the US, for example).
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- Through four kinds of online polls, the direct democracy mechanisms of referendum, recall, plebiscite and initiative may be implemented.
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What are the types of online polls?

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- **Decision polls**, which determine by majority vote whether or not a proposal

should be implemented.
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- **Opinion polls**, which provide opinion on specific matters (say, a proposed amendment to a law or the budgetary allocation for greening initiatives).
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- **Sentiment polls**, which gauge what the mood of the people is on the state of affairs
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- **Election polls**, which help elect the representatives of the people who would form the government
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What will be the benefits?

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- The new democracy would **enable greater inclusion,** decision-making based on verified data rather than educated guesses or arcane statistical methods, and defeating mala fide intentions.
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- **Voter turnout is likely to be higher** since the process of voting would not be as burdensome as going to a booth, and identity theft would be markedly lower than with voting booths.
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- With no significant bureaucracy or onerous processes required to organise the polls, the cost of running a well-informed and participative government would be only marginally higher to begin with.
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- The overall costs of governance over the medium and long term would drop dramatically owing to the far higher quality of decisions.
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How people’s movement can be formalised?

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- Online polls would also **act as conduits to channel movements mobilised by the general public and driven by the social media.**
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- In the future, such movements are likely to increase in number and intensity.
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- In a direct democracy, this sort of a movement would have conformed to the

original definition of initiative.
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- The re-engineered model of democracy provides formalism for the orderly incorporation of such movements.
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- In addition, the new model would provide institutional processes for unambiguously implementing the people’s will in situations such as what prevailed in Tamil Nadu.
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How scepticism could be avoided?

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- Sceptics of the proposed reforms to the indirect democracy model need only turn to online banking and e-commerce.
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- Very high volume transactions with uncompromised integrity of identity and accounting are being performed on a daily basis.
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- The error and breach rates are far lower than that of the traditional world of elections.
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What is the way ahead?

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- A report by NASSCOM and Akamai Technologies released around August 2016 predicts India would have 730 million internet users by 2020.
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- The vision of a re-engineered democracy would take a few years to realise and requires the creation of an Amazon or Netflix type technology architecture.
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- By the time the architecture is ready, the voting Indian population should have access to the internet through smartphones or otherwise.
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- Given its prowess in IT, India can lead the way by launching a distinct e-governance initiative centred on online polls and powerful analytics.
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Source: Business Line

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